

Georgian Foundation of Strategic and International Studies  
Georgia's Relationship with the EU: A Diverging Union  
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There is a conspicuous blemish on the current relationship between the European Union and Georgia. It is not a blemish that can be noticed from afar, but rather one that acts as an irritant beneath an otherwise smooth surface. The infected pore that is causing this blemish is a difference in perceptions and expectations. Despite all of the positive rhetoric about support for democracy, human rights, cooperation on issues of energy security and counter-terrorism, the EU and Georgia envision strikingly different paths for their newfound relationship. This is not to say that the state of relations is in jeopardy – in fact it is not. However, what exists is a potentially dangerous disparity in perceptions of certain issues as well as in expectations about the future this relationship.

From the perspective of the Georgian government there is great inconsistency between the words and actions emanating from Brussels. For example, after nearly doubling its membership in May 2004 from fifteen to twenty-five members, there has been frequent talk of the European Union suffering from 'enlargement fatigue'. Yet from the standpoint of many Georgians, this is impossible. According to Alexander Rondeli, President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, as long as the EU continues to promote these kinds of values it can never become 'tired'. If the values of democracy and human rights are going to be promoted as the basis for further engagement, then once a country fully adopts these values it should not be blocked from any level of membership – especially not a country that has branded itself as "European". The Georgians also see hypocrisy in other areas. How can the EU lecture Georgia about not escalating the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and turn its back when Russia provides passports, subsidized energy, weapons, and political support to the citizens of these territories? Why is it that the EU frequently speaks of the geo-strategic importance of Georgia but only one European head of state has made the short plane ride to Tbilisi? How can the EU preach to Georgia about finding a peaceful resolution to the separatist conflicts, but fail to fully commit itself to part of a proposed international peacekeeping force? The level of engagement that Georgia would like to see from the European Union clearly has not yet been realized.

The issue of Georgia's full integration into the European Union is not simply a 'right of passage', but is viewed more as a manner of 'returning home' to its rightful position in Europe. Having been estranged for so long, the time has come to return to its historic and cultural roots. According to many Georgians, Georgia is European. The Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Kote Gabashvili made it very clear to me that Georgians are "Europeans in Europe". Additionally, Former Minister Irakli Menagarishvili has commented to me that the "task of establishing a Europe without borders would not be accomplished if it did not reach the Caspian Sea". These remarks are more than just wishful thinking that can be attributed to post-Rose Revolution enthusiasm; they are expressions of deep-seated beliefs that Georgia belongs in the European Union. The donation nearly 420 million Euros to Georgia from 1992-2004 coupled with Georgia's inclusion into the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) has created perceptions in the country that the EU's engagement here is

similar to the manner in which the Union engaged itself in other post-Soviet countries. A membership proposal is viewed as naturally the next logical step in this process.

However, the European Union has been careful to keep its own interests in mind when selecting areas of engagement with Georgia. Though the EU has become increasingly involved in Georgia since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, despite corrupt and unresponsive governments, it has not been as involved as it has in other countries of the former Soviet Union. Georgia's strategic importance as a country that can assist the EU in efforts to counter drug smuggling, fight terrorism, prevent regional instability, and provide secure energy transport have not escaped the minds of EU policy-makers. While the EU has recognized that closer ties with Georgia are in its best interests, there are other factors that must be carefully considered before making decisions that might later become harmful. The EU has continuously walked a fine line in Georgia. When searching for reasons that would shed light on why there are significant misperceptions of such important topics, there are four issues that must be considered.

Firstly, the EU is still very young in developing sustainable and effective foreign policies towards its neighbors despite the fact that it was a Foreign Minister, France's Robert Schuman, who proposed the ideals on which the European Union was founded. Having grown from a Community that originally was focused on economic cooperation with political benefits, rather than vice-versa, the EU is understandably still experimenting with various regional policies. Though Georgia implemented the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1999, the appointment of an EU Special Representative to the South Caucasus is less than three years old, and Georgia's incorporation into the ENP didn't happen until June 2004. The EU's role in the country is new. As the European Union begins to wet its feet in the region, a balanced approach to sensitive political and economic issues is a reasonable policy.

The difference in the perception of Georgia's identity is another important issue to consider. While the 'Europeanness' of Georgia to its citizens is a decided matter, the same issue is much less of a certainty from a European standpoint. Up until November 2003, the public perception of Georgia was that it was just another post-Soviet country riddled in corruption, inefficiency and civil strife. While the Rose Revolution has certainly turned heads in Brussels and Strasbourg and made many citizens in the EU give a second thought to Georgia's true identity, their optimism remains a cautious one as many are watching to see whether these democratic reforms are sustainable and permanent.

Thirdly, it would be imprudent to make policy in the region without considering Russia's interests. The Soviet Union may well have collapsed long ago but the Russian Federation remains the force in the region, politically, economically and perhaps even socially. Due to its role as the most prominent energy supplier to Europe, the EU's heavy energy dependency on Russia is inevitably going to factor into policy decisions. Already importing thirty-eight percent of its gas and twenty-seven percent of its oil from the Russian Federation, it comes as little surprise that the EU might want to consider Russia's priorities when becoming involved in a country where there are overlapping interests, such as Georgia. While the EU may not have an openly pro-Russia policy, it is hard to see a policy ever develop that might even be tacitly hostile to Moscow's interests.

Finally, the ENP should be understood for what it is, rather than for what it is not. Georgia is a country that is a neighbor of the European Union and is now part of the European Neighborhood Policy, not the European Membership Policy. According to the ENP's Strategy Paper, being included into a partnership that offers "the chance to participate in various EU activities through greater political, security, economic and cultural cooperation" is a significant step in the direction of engagement and integration. It is simply unrealistic to think that membership would be offered without these reforms. It is in Georgia's best interest to make these reforms both for the sake of its own development as well as for its chances of becoming a closer partner of the EU, and only then to consider the possibility of full integration into the Union.

There is little doubt that high levels of engagement are in the interests of both parties. Yet the areas of cooperation and the speed at which ties are strengthened are areas that leave much to be discussed. As Georgia continues on its path to solidify democratic reforms and the EU deals with re-defining its identity at home and abroad, above all else there must be greater efforts to see eye to eye on these important issues. The European Union and Georgia have a very bright future ahead of them. Applying a mix of perspective with understanding is the best medication right now to ensure that their blemish recedes.

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